





# A TALE OF TWO...

Late night queen of the B movies, Elvira, has an ark of fans – and some are definitely animals. So says her voluptuous alter-ego, Cassandra Peterson.

WORDS: KRIS ASHTON

**M**any of us stumbled over her program during the 1980s. She was on late at night, introducing – and roasting – some of the lamest B-grade horror flicks to ever shamble out of Hollywood's dusty vaults. Yes, it's Elvira, who, with her trademark wit, innuendo and gravity-defying cleavage, developed a cult following among male and female alike. Her creator, Cassandra Peterson, has never felt the need to leave the dark path since.



something. Two of everything. I have general public but I have an incredibly large gay fan base. I get lots of mail from prisons and from biker clubs. Anybody with a motorcycle or in prison loves me. Lots of mail from the military because they're kind of in prison. God, everything, I tell you! I once talked to someone who said that other than Muhammad Ali, I was the celebrity who had been on more crossover television and radio shows than any other that they knew of. I've been on black rhythm and blues stations, on metal, pop, talk shows – everything but Christian radio – haven't done that one yet. Although, I have gotten autograph requests from priests and nuns.

## How were you originally cast as Elvira?

I was a struggling actress here in Hollywood and heard that they were looking for a horror host – because the horror host for many years, a guy named Seymour, had died. So they were looking to replace him. I heard about this interview from a friend and I went up. There were hundreds and hundreds of people interviewing. It was just a cattle call. I ended up getting the part!

They told me to come up with a costume that looked spooky. And a friend of mine at the time drew a picture of what he thought she should look like – and that's what we did.

## How long does it take to get dressed up as Elvira?

I have it down to like an hour and a half now. When I first started it was two and a half hours because I did everything so carefully and slowly. Now I just slap it on!

## Really???

Yeah, but you know how kinky they are.

## Have you had any weird experiences with fans?

Oh, God – millions. Too many to talk about. I've had a few serious ones that were considered stalking cases. I hear of those, let me tell you, because something in Elvira brings out the freak in people. But also I've had great experiences. I used to think it was very funny that I would sign my autograph on peoples arms or legs or butts or whatever. Then I would say, go and get this tattooed in and they would, they would be back in an hour with a big old bloody scabby patch on their arm. But that's kind of de rigueur now – that used to be a freaky thing, now I do it all the time. And I have dozens of photographs of people's tattoos – either my

# "I'VE GIVEN AUTOGRAPHS TO PRIESTS AND NUNS"

## Were you at all dubious about taking on the role?

No, I was happy to get an acting job of any kind. It wasn't like, "Oh, yippee, I've finally made the big time!". It was, "Oh boy, I get about \$200 a week and I get a job and I can go out, and it'll be part time so I can have time to look for serious acting work!" That never happened [laughs].

## What was Elvira's appeal – apart from the dress, obviously...

Yes, well that was part of it ... that was two big parts of it. But the funny thing is – we've done demographic studies several times – women actually like the character more. It's more popular with women. And I don't think that's because of the cleavage. I think it's because Elvira has a vulnerable side, but also there's a feminist side to Elvira, believe it or not. She's kinda like a female chauvinist pig, you know? She doesn't let guys get away with any crap and she stands up for whatever she believes – which is usually something really stupid – but at least she stands up for it.

I've always drawn a line in all the films; no guys ever run in and save her, she does all the saving. She gets herself into trouble but she also gets herself out of it. The women really like that strong character. They connect with this strong woman figure who's also not afraid to show her female parts. The ones you can show legally, anyway...

## What sort of fans does Elvira attract?

I tell you, I think I have one of everything [laughs]. It's like Noah's Ark or

autograph or my picture on them. So that's like just boring now.

I've had fans come up and do things like push screwdrivers up into their nose or hammer boards to their tongue. You name it, everything.

## Do you get younger fans coming in, or is it the same people who discovered Elvira in the '80s?

No, I'm very happy to say. Recently, during Halloween, I was making some appearances at casinos. You have to be 21 to get into a gambling casino here. I was really amazed at how many people were moms and dads who came in and said, "My child is out in the car crying, my teenage son is out in the parking lot. My daughter couldn't come because she's not 21, my little boy is only in kindergarten and they wouldn't let him in." It seemed like, "Uh oh, I've got the geriatric crowd here", but then it was like everyone was showing up and getting autographs for their kids. That made me really happy, let me tell you. When I first saw the crowd I thought, "Oh, Christ, I'm heading for the nursing home."

## Has Elvira had a negative effect on your other acting aspirations?

No, because after I got Elvira I didn't have any other aspirations. They just all went out the window. After being in show business and acting – and starving to death for the 15 years prior to [Elvira] – I was so thrilled to get Elvira that we jumped on that bandwagon and just took it to the limit. It's become my full time business.

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